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ABSTRACT

This study tests the hypothesis that discrepant information will receive greater exposure and will reach the desired audience when presented within the context of a news/documentary television program (task-oriented programming) instead of televised entertainment (non-task-oriented programming). After 134 college students completed a scale that measured them for authoritarianism, they rated their desire to view each of four program concepts described as either congruent or discrepant with their personal attitudes. The study's results tend to support the hypothesis: low-authoritarian (open-minded) television viewers tended to prefer to receive discrepant information from news/documentary rather than from entertainment programs; to a lesser degree, this same pattern held for high-authoritarian (close-minded) television viewers. The study concludes that prior knowledge of program content affects one's desire to watch. (RL)

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SELECTIVE EXPOSURE TO DISCREPANT ENTERTAINMENT AND NEWS/DOCUMENTARY TELEVISION PROGRAMS

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Selective exposure is defined as "a systematic bias in audience composition." Based upon predictions posited from cognitive consistency theories, the principle of selective exposure predicts that individuals tend to be exposed to those messages that are expected to support their attitudinal predispositions.

Selective exposure to supportive mass media content has been accepted by many researchers; however, the corollary to this principle, concerning selective non-exposure to discrepant information has not been satisfactorily confirmed.[1]

Much of the research conducted in the area of selective exposure to the mass media has been related to the communication of political information. Even if not dealing directly with political issues, the selective exposure hypothesis has been exclusively conceptualized within a utilitarian and task-oriented informational context.[2] The present study looks at exposure to congruent and discrepant politically-oriented mass media content within both a task and non-task oriented context.

Selective Exposure to Task-Oriented Content

Many studies have demonstrated defacto selectivity; they interpret their findings as resulting from self-motivated seeking of supportive information and active avoidance of discrepant material.[3] Other researchers conclude that "exposure" is more a function of overall exposure to media sources, combined with the selective perception and retention of content to which the receiver is exposed. This interpretation is most prevalent in

studies dealing with exposure to televised political news and advertising.[4]

The rationale for self-motivated exposure to discrepant mass media content is derived from the fact that the mass media have become the most relied upon sources of information for most people.[5] Thus, in an effort to become better informed about our complex society, some cognitive discrepancy is endured.[6] This is the "why" of exposure to discrepant mass media content.

The personality characteristics which predict more or less exposure comprise the "who" aspect of exposure to discrepant mass media content. The amount of discrepancy (cognitive discomfort) one can endure; and, the perceived utility of this discrepant information comprise the "what" and "when" aspects, respectively. Finally, the message system context within which this discrepant information is communicated comprises the "where" of this issue. After briefly discussing the "who, what, and when" aspects of selective exposure to discrepant mass media content, the aspect of "where" will be more fully considered.

In studying the "who" aspect, findings by Donohew and Palmgreen (1971) suggest that the low dogmatic or "open-minded" message receiver is more apt to be exposed to discrepant information than is the high dogmatic or "narrow-minded" individual. This fits the description of an open-minded person as the type of individual who can better cope with discrepant information.[7]

Katz and Gurevitch (1976) find that many Jewish Isrealis watch Arabic television programs and news programs, even though many Isreali Jews do not understand Arabic. This indicates a strong utilitarian "need to know" by people who feel that exposure to potentially discrepant television content may be of assistance in coping with future decisions which may have life-and-death implications.[8] Likewise, individuals who have been relatively

"saturated" with supportive, consonant information may then be psychologically prepared for exposure to discrepant information.[9] These comprise the "when" aspects of selective exposure to discrepant information.

Other studies dealing with "when" exposure will occur involve the search for information, especially political information. One may expose oneself to a low credible source who supports a discrepant view as a means of strengthening one's opposition to the message or of derogating the message source.[10] Atkin, et. al., (1972) infer this to be the case in explaining exposure to political advertisements for a non-preferred candidate. [11] Likewise, when people feel that they have little knowledge of a non-preferred candidate, findings indicate that exposure to advertising for the non-preferred candidate,[12] and to televised debates between the preferred and non-preferred candidates[13] will be increased.

The amount of dissonance one can endure, or the "what" aspect of exposure to discrepant mass media content, has not been explored. This aspect of the issue is perhaps the most complex to study since it seems to be inextricably interrelated with the "who, where, and when" aspects of exposure. This will be left for later research.

The "where" aspect of exposure has also not been adequately studied. Does the medium within which the discrepant message is contained affect one's exposure to the message? Does the context, within a medium, which the discrepant information appears affect exposure? Past research has used televised advertisements, debates, speeches, telethons, as well as mailed messages interchangeably as if the context of the message was of no consequence.

This present study looks at the presentation of discrepant information within the context of news/documentary (task-oriented) and entertainment (non-task oriented) formats. The medium carrying these two types of messages, remains constant. Thus, the question to be answered is: will there be a greater tendency for individuals to selectively expose themselves to discrepant information when it is presented within the context of televised news/documentary or as entertainment?

Selective Exposure to Non-Task-Oriented Content

Recent research on audience viewing patterns for television entertainment programs indicate that selective exposure to supportive, and non-exposure to discrepant, content does occur. Demographic and psychographic audience variables predict exposure to programs which depict highly opinionated characters; voicing opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and values relating to topical social issues.[14]

Social psychologists and functional communication theorists[15] stress the fact that audiences consciously use mass media content to gather information. Thus, when content is presented as news/documentary, even if it be discrepant to a person's belief system, one would assume that the message will be seen. However, one might assume a lessened desire for exposure to entertainment program content when one expects it to be discrepant with one's belief system. Although the entertainment-oriented program may contain "useful" coping information one would not "expect" the utility of this information to be worth the cognitive discomfort one would have to endure within this particular message context. In other words, entertainment, or non-task oriented messages, are used for pleasure, fantasy, and escape

(i.e., learning discrepant information, even if it is useful information).

Theory and prior research suggests that there is a greater tendency for viewers to remain non-exposed to discrepant entertainment television content relative to mass media content which is discrepant but task-oriented. Thus, the working hypothesis for the present study states that: viewers will exhibit a greater tendency to be exposed to televised news/documentary discrepant content than to televised entertainment discrepant content.

Methodology

The author developed four television program concepts each having a political orientation.[16] Two of the programs were conceptualized as being produced in the "news/documentary" format and two as "entertainment" format programs. Likewise, within each program format, one program was conceptualized as congruent with the beliefs of high authoritarians (discrepant with low authoritarians); and, one program discrepant with the beliefs of high authoritarians (congruent with low authoritarians).

The following program descriptions correspond to the conceptualized program types:

(1) News/Documentary - format, congruent with high and low authoritarian viewers - "A biographical documentary about the presidential candidate which you personally endorse, following his life from childhood through to his present position. An interview with him highlights his past experiences as the basis for his present stand on issues."

(2) News/Documentary - format, discrepant with high and low authoritarian viewers - "A biographical documentary about the presidential

candidate which you do not personally endorse, following his life from childhood through to his present position. An interview with him highlights his past experiences as the basis for his present stand on issues."

(3) Entertainment - format, congruent with high authoritarian viewers (discrepant with low authoritarian viewers) - "This fictional weekly-series follows high-ranking federal officials through their home life, social life, and 'typical' workday experiences. The show depicts the 'world' of the high-level government official and the hard, sometimes controversial decisions which must be made. Overall, the portrayed characters are shown to be well qualified and dedicated 'public servants'."

(4) Entertainment - format, discrepant with high authoritarian viewers (congruent with low authoritarian viewers) - "Each week this satirical series presents sketches that poke fun at our complex federal governmental hierarchy; such as within the departments of education, foreign affairs, military, etc. Typically each show focuses on a basic conflict in each department that is most difficult to resolve."

The author's categorization system for each of the program concepts was tested by having fourteen impartial judges (N=14) categorize each concept as to its congruency/discrepancy for authoritarian individuals, its political-orientation, and whether it be news/documentary or entertainment-oriented in format. Seven of the judges were professors in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication and seven were graduate students in the same school. All judges unanimously agreed that all program concepts dealt with a political theme. Concerning, the news/documentary vs. entertainment-

orientation, ratings ranged from 86% to 100% agreement with the author's categorization system. There was 86% to 93% agreement concerning an authoritarian's perceived congruency/discrepancy of the four program concepts. These coefficients effectively support the author's categorization system, and are interpreted as support for the validity of the authors' operationalization of the concepts into program types.

Respondents consisted of college students enrolled in the authors' Mass Communication Theory and Philosophy course, during Fall quarter 1976. The total sample consisted of one hundred and thirty-four (N=134) respondents. Each individual filled out a short-form authoritarianism scale;[17] and, rated on a seven-interval scale their desire to view each of the four program concepts, anchored on each polar end-point by the statements, "Would make an effort to watch" to "Would not make an effort to watch."

The total sample was trichotomized into high (n=45), medium (n=42), and low (n=47) authoritarian subgroups. One-way analysis of variance was used to determine between subgroup differences concerning "desire to see" each of the four program concepts; t-tests were run when significant one-way anovas were found. Also, within authoritarian subgroup analysis was conducted between program formats using t-test analysis as a means of testing the working hypothesis.

Results

The news/documentary programs did not elicit differential levels of desired exposure from the authoritarian subgroups. This finding held for news/documentary programs that were either congruent for all the respondents (program #1) or discrepant for all the respondents (program #2). This

result seems to result more from equally distributed levels of congruence/dissonance than for reasons related to the fact that they were categorized as news/documentary programs.

- - Table #1 about here - -

However, significant differences were found when the entertainment-oriented programs were manipulated to be either congruent/discrepant with high authoritarian beliefs. In the instance where the program is operationalized as being congruent with high authoritarian beliefs (program #3), the mid and high authoritarian subgroups are significantly more apt to desire exposure than are low authoritarians. When the program is discrepant with high authoritarian beliefs (program #4), the mid and high authoritarian subgroups are less apt to desire exposure than are low authoritarians.

The working hypothesis for this study is tested through within subgroup analysis. The discrepant documentary was expected to elicit more desired exposure than the discrepant entertainment program within each authoritarian subgroup. The two most extreme authoritarian subgroups were analyzed so as to test the hypothesis within the most divergent subgroups possible.

- - Table #2 about here - -

The hypothesis is supported within the low authoritarian subgroup. No difference in desired exposure was found between the congruent news/documentary and entertainment programs for the low authoritarians. However, in the discrepant condition, the news/documentary program was significantly more desired for exposure than was the entertainment program ($p < .04$).

Within the high authoritarian subgroup, the desire for exposure to the discrepant news/documentary was greater than for the entertainment program but to a lesser degree ($p < .12$). However, it was in the hypothesized direction. High authoritarians did exhibit a greater desire for exposure to the congruent news/documentary than for the congruent entertainment program ($p < .001$).

Discussion

For low authoritarians, or open-minded television viewers, a greater desire for exposure to discrepant news/documentary program content relative to entertainment content was found to exist. To a lesser degree this same pattern held for high authoritarian television viewers. This subgroup difference cannot be explained by each group's predisposition to discrepant information. Opposite to what might have been expected based upon the findings by Donohew and Palmgreen (Winter 1971), the low authoritarian group exhibited relatively greater resistance to viewing a discrepant entertainment program than did high authoritarians; although both groups were significantly less likely to desire exposure to an entertainment television program discrepant with their beliefs. In general, high authoritarians did not greatly differentiate their desired exposure to congruent or discrepant entertainment programming.

When a news/documentary is equally congruent or discrepant with subgroup beliefs no between authoritarian subgroup differences in desired exposure are noted. Likewise, for low authoritarians when a televised program is congruent, whether it be news/documentary or entertainment, no relative differences in desired exposure are noted. However, for high

authoritarians the congruent news/documentary is desired over the congruent entertainment program. This difference could be explained by the greater need by high authoritarians for "real" data that would support their beliefs. The low authoritarian may not feel as great a need for belief support in this manner.

Thus, support has been found for the hypothesis that discrepant information will receive greater desired exposure when presented within the context of a news/documentary program, or task-oriented programming; as opposed to presentation in entertainment or non-task-oriented programming. Likewise, closed-minded viewers exhibit this same tendency for congruent television program content. This is probably because of a greater need for "real" information which confirms their beliefs. Finally, for all groups of viewers, entertainment programming which is discrepant to their beliefs is not desired for viewing. Clearly, prior knowledge of program content affects one's desire to watch.

Further research should attempt to equate the degree of discrepancy contained within each of the program formats. Likewise, other topic areas for program content, besides politically-oriented topics, should be studied. Finally, field or laboratory experiments should be conducted so that behavioral measures of exposure can be equated to survey findings. Psychographic subgroup measures and, possibly, informational-need-states seem to be significant predictors of differences in selective exposure to discrepant television program content.

Footnotes

1. The most recent reviews of the "selective exposure" hypothesis include: David Sears and Jonathan Freedman, "Selective Exposure to Information: A Critical Review," Public Opinion Quarterly, 31:194-213 (1967); Judson Mills, "Interest in Supporting and Discrepant Information, in Robert Abelson et. al., eds., Theories of Cognitive Consistency (Chicago, Rand McNally, 1968), pp. 771-76; David Sears, "The Paradox of DeFacto Selective Exposure Without Preferences for Supportive Information," in Robert Abelson, ibid., pp. 777-87; Elihu Katz, "On Reopening the Question of Selectivity in Exposure to Mass Communications," in Robert Abelson, ibid., pp. 788-96; William J. McGuire, "Selective Exposure: A Summing Up," in Robert Abelson, ibid., pp. 797-800; Maxwell E. McCombs, "Mass Communication in Political Campaigns: Information, Gratification, and Persuasion," in Kline and Tichenor, eds., Current Perspectives in Mass Communication Research (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1972), pp. 169-194; David Sears and Richard Whitney, "Political Persuasion," in Ithiel de Solo Pool and Wilbur Schramm, eds., Handbook of Communication (Chicago: Rand McNally 1973), pp. 253-289; W. Phillips Davison, James Boylon, Frederick T.C. Yu, "Selectivity: Or How We Cope with Information," in Mass Media: Systems and Effects (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1976), see: pp. 131-147.

2. Lewis Donohew and Philip Palmgreen, "A Reappraisal of Dissonance and the Selective Exposure Hypothesis," Journalism Quarterly, 48:412-420, 437 (Autumn 1971); M. Mark Miller, "Task Orientation and Salience as Determinants of Source Utility," Journalism Quarterly, 49:669-673 (Winter 1972); Michael E. Roloff, "A Model of the Selective Exposure Phenomenon," paper presented to Speech Communication Association Convention, Houston, Texas, December 1975.

3. Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet, The Peoples' Choice (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948); Bernard Berelson, Paul Lazarsfeld and William McPhee, Voting (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954); Wilbur Schramm and Richard Carter, "The Effectiveness of a Political Telethon," Public Opinion Quarterly, 23:121-127 (1959); Guido Stempel, "Selectivity in Readership of Political News," Public Opinion Quarterly, 25:400-404 (1961); Jonathan Freedman and David Sears, "Voters' Preferences Among Types of Information," American Psychologist, 14:375 (1963); Charles K. Atkin, "How Imbalanced Campaign Coverage Affects Audience Exposure Patterns," Journalism Quarterly, 48:235-244 (Summer 1971); Dorothy L. Barlett, et. al., "Selective Exposure to a Presidential Campaign Appeal," Public Opinion Quarterly, 38:264-270 (1974).

4. Charles K. Atkin, et. al., "Quality Versus Quantity in Televised Political Ads," Public Opinion Quarterly, 37:209-224 (Summer 1973); Michael Robinson, "American Political Legitimacy in an Era of Electronic Journalism: Reflections on the Evening New," in Douglass Cater, ed., Television as a Social Force: New Approaches to TV Criticism (New York: Praeger Publications, 1975) pp. 97-139; Stuart H. Surlin and Thomas F. Gordon, "Selective Exposure and Retention of Political Advertising," Journal of Advertising, 5:32-37, 44 (Winter 1976); Stuart H. Surlin and Thomas F. Gordon, "How Values Affect Attitudes Toward Direct Reference Political Advertising," Journalism Quarterly, 54:89-98 (Spring 1977).

Footnotes (Cont.)

5. Robert Bower, Television and the Public (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1973).

6. Social psychologists have interpreted exposure to discrepant information as a logical mode of coping behavior, "...Information that is new, surprising, and corrective to his preconceptions seems so useful that it is unlikely that the human would have evolved with the tendency systematically to avoid such useful environmental feedback." William J. McGuire, "The Nature of Attitudes and Attitude Change," in Lindzey and Aronson, eds., Handbook of Social Psychology (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1969), p. 219. Likewise, Carter, Pyszka, and Guerrero state, "...one can not readily accept, a priori, the notion that aversive information is to be avoided. And any theoretical view of cognitive processes should be skeptical of a postulate which constrains us from observing formulative functions of communication behavior." (p. 42) "Dissonance and Exposure to Aversive Information," Journalism Quarterly, 46:37-42 (Spring 1969).

7. Lewis Donohew and Phillip Palmgreen, "An Investigation of 'Mechanisms' of Information Selection," Journalism Quarterly, 48:627-639+ (Winter 1971).

8. Elihu Katz and Michael Gurevitch, The Secularization of Leisure: Culture and Communication in Isreal (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

9. Charles Atkin, "Reassessing Two Alternative Explanations of De Facto Selective Exposure," paper presented to the American Association for Public Opinion Research, Lake George, New York, 1970.

10. Alexis S. Tan, "Exposure to Discrepant Information and Effect of Three Coping Modes," Journalism Quarterly, 52:678-684 (Winter 1975); James C. McCroskey and Samuel V.O. Prichard, "Selective-Exposure and Lyndon B. Johnsons' 1966 'State of the Union' Address," Journal of Broadcasting, 11:331-337 (Fall 1967).

11. Charles K. Atkin, et al., "Patterns of Voter Reception and Response to Televised Political Advertising in Two Gubernatorial Campaigns," paper presented to Association for Education in Journalism, Carbondale, Illinois, August 1972.

12. Oguz B. Nayman, Kenneth J. Berry, and Dan L. Lattimore, "Televised Political Advertising and the Voter: A Survey of Voter Attitudes in the 1972 Presidential Campaign," paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism, San Diego, California, 1974.

13. Joseph C. Philport, "A Functional Analysis of the First Ford-Carter Debate in the Matrix of Television," unpublished manuscript, Department of Telecommunication, Miami (Ohio) University, 1976.

Footnotes (Cont.)

14. John D. Leckenby and Stuart H. Surlin, "Incidental Social Learning from Black and White-Oriented TV Entertainment," Journal of Broadcasting, 20:481-494 (Fall 1976); Stuart H. Surlin, "Race and the Selective Exposure/Perception of Racial Integration in TV Entertainment Programming," paper presented to the Speech Communication Association, San Francisco, California, 1976.

15. Jay Blumler and Elihu Katz, eds., The Uses of Mass Communications: Current Perspectives on Gratification Research (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1974).

16. Television program concepts as the stimuli for viewer reaction have been effectively developed and used in research by: Robert R. Monaghan, et al., "Predicting Viewer Preference for New TV Program Concepts," Journal of Broadcasting, 18:131-142 (Spring 1974); Navita C. James and Thomas A. McCain, "Predicting Black Viewer Preferences in Black-Oriented Television Programming," paper presented to the International Communication Association, Portland, Oregon, 1976.

17. The Christie Forced Choice F Scale (short form) was used to tap authoritarianism. The scale consists of twelve pairs of questions (each pair stating a similar but reversed-direction statement) upon which an individual first chooses his statement and then selects one of three levels of agreement with the chosen statement relative to the non-chosen statement. This technique negates the acquiescent response set reportedly found in earlier versions of the scale. The scale is discussed and reproduced in: John P. Robinson and Phillip R. Shaver, Measures of Social Psychological Attitudes (Ann Arbor: Institute of Social Research, 1969), pp. 245-249.

Table #1

Desired Exposure to Congruent/Discrepant, News/Documentary - Entertainment Political Television Programs Between Between High, Mid, and Low Authoritarian Subgroups

(N=134)
(1-7 Scale, 1=would watch)

Program #1 - Congruent for all - news/documentary ($F=2.10$, $p<.12$) n.s.

Authoritarian	$\bar{x}$
Low (n=47)	2.11
Mid (n=42)	2.28
High (n=45)	1.71
Overall	2.03

Program #2 - Discrepant for all - news/documentary ($F=0.90$, $p<.41$) n.s.

Authoritarian	$\bar{x}$
Low (n=47)	3.57
Mid (n=42)	3.14
High (n=45)	3.04
Overall	3.26

Program #3 - Congruent for high authoritarians - entertainment ($F=3.02$, $p<.05$)

Authoritarian	$\bar{x}$	
Low (n=47)	4.38	Low vs. Mid - $t=2.21$, $p<.03$
Mid (n=42)	3.60	Low vs. High - $t=2.06$, $p<.04$
High (n=45)	3.60	
Overall	3.87	

Program #4 - Discrepant for high authoritarians - entertainment ($F=12.23$, $p<.001$)

Authoritarian	$\bar{x}$	
Low (n=47)	2.04	Low vs Mid - $t=3.27$, $p<.002$
Mid (n=42)	3.10	Low vs. High - $t=5.03$, $p<.001$
High (n=45)	3.69	
Overall	2.92	

Table #2

Desired Exposure to Congruent/Discrepant, News/Documentary - Entertainment Political Television Programs Within High and Low Authoritarian Subgroups

(N=92)
(1-7 Scale, 1=would watch)

Low Authoritarians (n=47)	
$\bar{x}$	$\bar{x}$
News/Documentary/Congruent - 2.11	Discrepant - 3.57
Entertainment/Congruent - 2.04	Discrepant - 4.38
$t=0.23$, $p<.82$	$t=2.04$, $p<.04$
High Authoritarians (n=45)	
$\bar{x}$	$\bar{x}$
News/Documentary/Congruent - 1.71	Discrepant - 3.04
Entertainment/Congruent - 3.60	Discrepant - 3.69
$t=5.88$, $p<.001$	$t=1.59$, $p<.12$